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C O R R E C T E D C O P Y - TEXT THRUOUT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/02/2016
TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL BO
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION CANDIDATE RELEASED FROM DETENTION,
CONTINUES ACTIVITIES

REF: A. MINSK 223

1B. MINSK 191

Classified By: AMBASSADOR GEORGE KROL FOR REASONS 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: On March 2, opposition presidential candidate Aleksandr Kozulin was released from October Police Station between 1700 and 1800 local time (ref A). Following his release, Kozulin, his wife, and several members of Kozulin's political party went to the site of opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich's campaign rally and gave an impromptu press conference to nearby journalists on his next steps. Kozulin, who had bruises on his head and a split lip, confirmed he did not feel well. The state prosecutor filed two counts of "hooliganism" against Kozulin, which could result in his disqualification as a candidate, but Kozulin vowed to continue his campaign activities. Central Election Committee Secretary Nikolai Lozovik told P/E Chief on March 3 that the CEC will most likely allow Kozulin to remain in the electoral race. End Summary

Only Lawyer Allowed To See Kozulin In Detention

12. (SBU) The police at the October Police Station not only barred Kozulin's family and supporters from seeing him, OSCE-ODIHR election observers and political analyst confirmed they were also not allowed to enter the building. ODIHR long-term observers told Emboffs on March 2 they made several unsuccessful attempts to enter the October, Central, and Lenin Police Stations, where 50-60 Kozulin activists and journalists were detained. At around 1600, ODIHR observers confirmed that OSCE Ambassador to Minsk Ake Peterson (not affiliated with the ODIHR mission) was also denied entry to the October Police Station. Only one of Kozulin's lawyers, Dmitry Goryachko, was allowed to enter the police station. Goryachko discussed with police investigators the possible criminal charges against Kozulin, and then was able to see the candidate.

Prior To Release, Kozulin Campaign Team Gives Press Conference

13. (SBU) At 1545, Kozulin's press spokeswoman Nina Shidlovskaya told Emboffs that she earlier spoke with Kozulin by phone and he claimed he did not need medical attention.

Kozulin did indicate that he felt pain in the kidney area (where he was presumably kicked). Shidlovskaya told the press that an ambulance was called for Kozulin, but the ambulance crew was denied entry to the police station. The doctor on call at the police station reportedly examined Kozulin and concluded that he was in satisfactory condition.

¶ 14. (SBU) At 1600 local time, campaign manager Myacheslav Grib and Kozulin's wife Irina gave a press conference for journalists and international observers at Kozulin's campaign headquarters. Irina confirmed she spoke with her husband twice while he was in detention and noted that she could tell he was in pain. Clearly despondent, Irina said she was comforted by Kozulin's optimism and determination to keep up the struggle against an unjust system. Grib made a public appeal to State Prosecutor Peter Miklashevich to open a criminal case against Special Riot Police head Colonel Dmitry Pavlichenko and those who physically assaulted Kozulin, his supporters, and journalists at the Palace of the Railway Workers.

¶ 15. (C) Following the press conference, Kozulin's aid Oleg Volchek told P/E Chief that on February 27 Kozulin personally delivered formal written complaints to State Prosecutor Miklashevich regarding the BKGB's illegal surveillance of Kozulin and the February 17 altercation between Kozulin and Belarusian security forces at the National Press Center (ref B). Volchek claimed that during the meeting Kozulin warned Miklashevich to take action on these complaints or he would organize public demonstrations to denounce Belarusian security forces as death squads. Miklashevich reportedly assured Kozulin he would "take care" of the delivered complaints. (Comment: Perhaps the March 2 beating of Kozulin is what the State Prosecutor had in mind when he said he would address Kozulin's grievances.)

Kozulin Released From Detention, Criminal Case Initiated

¶ 16. (U) Kozulin was released from the October Police Station at 1740 local time. Kozulin's press secretary told the press Kozulin was in bad physical condition, including bruises to his head and face. Kozulin's lawyer Goryachko confirmed the candidate was charged with two counts of "hooliganism": one for the February 17 incident at the National Press Center and one for his refusal to leave the premises of the Palace of the Railroad Workers on March 2.

Detained Campaign Supporters and Journalists Released

¶ 17. (SBU) Kozulin aid Oleg Volchek reported to Post that all of the 50-60 campaign activists and journalists who were standing outside October Police Station and in Freedom Square on March 2 were released the same day. Kozulin campaign team members reported that up to 40 activists and journalists were detained at Freedom Square and 12-20 people were detained outside the October Police Station. Press reports indicate a number of journalists were assaulted at the Palace of the Railway Workers and outside the October Police Station. A journalist from Reuters and another from Komsomolskaya Pravda (KP) were hospitalized. The Reuters journalist was released from the hospital on March 2, and the KP journalist remains in the hospital with a concussion. KP reported that the spokesperson for the Ministry of Interior reportedly visited the KP journalist to apologize for the incident and to inquire into the possibility that the journalist's injuries resulted from falling in the snow.

Kozulin Shows Up At Milinkevich Rally, Gives Separate Press Conference

¶ 18. (SBU) Following his release, Kozulin went to the site of 10 Plus opposition candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich's campaign rally (see septel). Kozulin's campaign manager Grib said

Kozulin did not participate in Milinkevich's rally, but "was in the area and decided to observe the event." Press reports indicate that approximately 10 minutes after Milinkevich's rally ended, Kozulin gave an impromptu press conference to journalists who were covering the rally. Kozulin confirmed that he was in pain, particularly his head, and that he faced two counts of hooliganism.

¶19. (C) Kozulin noted that it was likely the Central Election Committee would disqualify him as a candidate because of these charges, but he vowed to continue his campaign to seek admittance to the Third All Belarus Assembly as the "people's delegate." Kozulin indicated he would again seek registration to participate as a delegate in the All Belarus Assembly. (Note: Kozulin's campaign advisors told P/E Chief they have advised their candidate to avoid doing something so "senseless" and dangerous, but they recognized Kozulin will in the end do what he wants to do.)

Campaign Team Files Complaints For March 2 Incidents

¶110. (SBU) Kozulin's aid Volchek talked to P/E Chief while Volchek waited for his appointment at the October District Prosecutor's Office. Volchek planned to submit formal complaints for the March 2 beatings, arrests, and the use of firearms in an attempt to detain Kozulin supporters.

Kozulin Likely To Remain A Candidate, Pre-Recorded Remarks
Edited

¶111. (C) On March 3, Central Election Committee Nikolai Lozovik told P/E Chief he did not believe the criminal charges against Kozulin would be enough to disqualify him as a candidate. The CEC official noted that until Kozulin was found guilty of hooliganism and sentenced in a court of law, which could take up to several weeks, the CEC did not have a legal basis to remove Kozulin's name from the ballot. Lozovik added that the CEC is a "liberal institution" that is not interested in disqualifying candidates.

¶112. (U) Despite speculation by Kozulin's campaign team, Belarusian State Television (BT) broadcast the candidate's pre-recorded remarks at 1800 local time, suggesting the CEC (for now) will allow Kozulin to contest the elections. However, Kozulin's campaign manager Grib confirmed BT edited the candidate's remarks, specifically Kozulin's claim that Lukashenko's leadership qualities originate from when he worked as a prison guard and that the President violated nepotism laws by placing his two sons in formal or informal positions of authority.

Comment

¶113. (C) Kozulin seems committed to his strategy of "unconventional" campaigning, despite the brutal assault and detention. The Kozulin campaign strategy is fundamentally based on smearing President Lukashenko (and his family) and provoking clashes with Belarusian security forces. Given that Kozulin's campaign manager recently admitted to P/E Chief that the extent of Kozulin's regular campaign activities have mainly involved preparing for his two TV broadcasts on February 17 and March 2, headline-grabbing public statements and actions may be the only card Kozulin can play. Moreover, we cannot exclude the possibility Kozulin may be seeking disqualification from the electoral race, or at least to be beaten up and jailed, in an effort to become the country's next political martyr and hero. If the position of the CEC is any indicator, Lukashenko, perhaps recognizing Kozulin's plan, has decided to keep Kozulin in the race, for now.

¶14. (C) The impact of this strategy on voters remains unclear. While many observers and analysts believe Kozulin's approach is more in the style of Lukashenko and therefore more effective with typical Belarusian voters, others believe Kozulin is simply a clown and falls far short of Lukashenko's ability to develop strong relations with voters all over the country (see septel). On the other hand, the GOB has clearly demonstrated it will respond to Kozulin's provocative tactics in kind. During his March 2 remarks at the All Belarus Assembly, Lukashenko, without mentioning names, noted the Kozulin incident, saying "They (Kozulin and his supporters) were determined to break into this assembly with their marine training. They started scuffling, beat up women, and banged against marines who let them have it." (Note: Kozulin was a former marine.)

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